



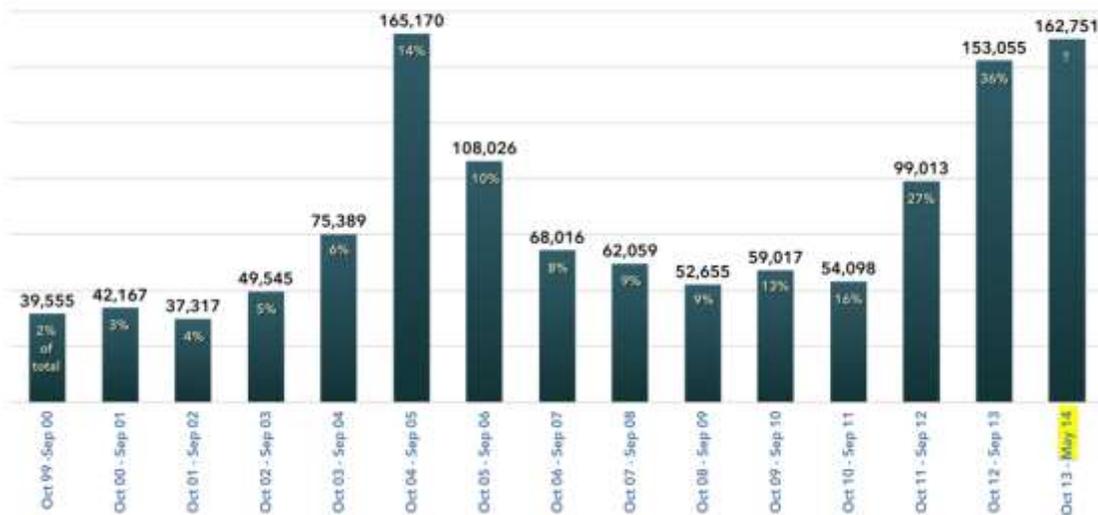
## **Executive Summary: Mexico's Other Border** WOLA Reports on Security and the Crisis in Central American Migration Between Mexico and Guatemala

Along the U.S.-Mexico border, especially in south Texas, authorities are stunned by a sudden wave of migrants from three Central American countries: El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. The U.S. Border Patrol is on track to apprehend over four times more citizens of these countries in 2014 than it did in 2011. An alarming number of them are unaccompanied children. In the first eight months of fiscal year 2014, Border Patrol encountered 34,611 children from those three Central American nations traveling without adult relatives—up from less than 4,000 in 2011.

Contrary to what some in Washington allege, no slackening of U.S. border security policy is to blame for this surge. In fact, under current constraints, there is little that the Obama administration could have done to prevent it.

The real humanitarian emergency is not just in south Texas shelters and detention facilities. It runs along the entire migration route to the United States, from the violence-torn slums of Central America, to Mexico's treacherous train lines and crowded detention centers, to the forbidding deserts on the U.S. side of the border where hundreds die each year.

### **U.S. Apprehensions of "Other Than Mexican" Migrants, 2000-May 2014**



Sources: 2000-12: <http://bit.ly/SgE5UY> / 2013: <http://1.usa.gov/5gEabp> / 2014: <http://1.usa.gov/1j72KCR>

Experts from WOLA's Border Security and Migration Program spent 12 days in February at Mexico's southern border where Central American migrants' journey begins. In the report, *Mexico's Other Border*, WOLA provides a detailed, first-hand view of what is happening at Mexico's 714-mile-long southern

border with Central America. With 65 images, maps, statistics, and testimonies, the report not only explains what Mexico’s “other border” looks like, it shows very clearly what is at stake for policymakers under pressure to “do something” about the current wave of migrants.

On this southern border, we found a sharp rise in migration from El Salvador, Guatemala, and especially Honduras. Officials and migrant shelter workers are encountering dramatically more women, children, and families bound for the United States. Their numbers are taxing an already fragile system trying to provide humanitarian assistance to this vulnerable population. The migrants are being forced out of their countries of origin by unemployment, lack of economic opportunities, and some of the worst criminal violence in the world, including intolerable levels of homicide, extortion, abuse, and recruitment by street gangs. Almost no migrants mention being motivated by any perception of changed U.S. immigration policy or lax border security.

As *Mexico’s Other Border* describes, it is easy to cross the border from Guatemala or Belize into Mexico, whether by wading, taking a raft, walking through the countryside, or passing through an official crossing. WOLA staff crossed four times without having to show a passport. A majority of the cocaine consumed in the United States also crosses here. Once in Mexico, though, Central American migrants face an official border security strategy that is hard to define, at times contradictory, and unevenly implemented; but the policy has clearly been tightening, often with U.S. backing.



*The border between Petén, Guatemala and Tabasco, Mexico.*

Mexican border security toughens inland from the borderline. Roads and rivers are heavily policed: in one 140-mile stretch of highway near the border, WOLA's staff passed through 11 checkpoints run by nine different federal and state agencies. Security forces' presence and capabilities are increasing, with U.S. backing, in both Mexico and Guatemala. However, these law enforcement, military, migration, investigative, and intelligence agencies are poorly coordinated, suffer from endemic corruption, routinely extort migrants, and manage to stop only a tiny fraction of U.S.-bound drugs.

The southern border has two lines of northbound cargo trains that are policed far less than the highways. For tens of thousands of Central American migrants these trains are the main option for getting across Mexico. The long ride atop the train is physically dangerous, and the lack of security leaves migrants at the mercy of Central American gangs, Mexican cartels, bandits, kidnappers, and corrupt officials. Migrants traveling on the trains and along Mexico's highways are easy victims, as reporting crime to the police means risking deportation. The stunning frequency of kidnapping, extortion, human trafficking, rape, and homicide puts the plight of Central American migrants in transit through Mexico atop the list of the Western Hemisphere's worst humanitarian emergencies.



*Soldiers man a checkpoint in Chiapas.*

As the situation worsens, Mexico, the United States, and Central American nations need a new approach to security and migration in the “first crossing” zone. Following the U.S. prescription of barriers, patrols, soldiers, and technology, though, could do more harm than good.

There is already a significant security presence in southern Mexico: statelessness is not the issue. Instead, in a situation where enforcement personnel are poorly trained, have little coordination, and are not held accountable for corruption or abuse, adding still more uniformed personnel, checkpoints, and surveillance could increase abuses and trigger more violence, without actually reducing migrant flows or trafficking.

The most promising solutions are the most difficult to implement politically. The United States needs a comprehensive immigration reform that sets clear rules for pathways to citizenship and addresses agriculture work programs, immigrant and work visas, and future immigration flows. Mexico should expand the use of humanitarian visas and similar mechanisms so migrants who are victims of violence or abuse, and accompanied minors, can go to the authorities without fear of deportation. Mexico's judiciary and internal control units need dramatic improvements so that they may investigate and sanction officials who commit human rights violations and other abuses, and to stamp out corruption, the oxygen that sustains violent criminal groups. And Central American governments and elites need to start protecting their citizens against violence and investing in education and job creation at home.

These recommendations will be either a heavy lift or slow to implement. In the meantime, *Mexico's Other Border* recommends several smaller steps that governments can take now, if not to solve, then at least to mitigate the abuses and begin to address the crisis of border security and migration in the Mexico-Guatemala border zone. These include the following:

- Using U.S. assistance to help Mexico dramatically increase the presence of judicial, prosecutorial, and investigative bodies to crack down on organized crime and gang activity in the border zone, and the widespread official corruption that sustain them. A functioning criminal justice system, able to enforce rules clearly and fairly, is indispensable.
- Greatly increasing cooperation between Mexico's law enforcement, immigration enforcement, and judicial agencies that too often work separately, and distrustfully, in the border zone.
- Strengthening accountability mechanisms for Mexico's police at all levels and the National Migration Institute.
- Terminating the involvement of Mexico's armed forces in citizen security tasks that civilian agencies could just as easily perform in the border zone, and ending U.S. support for such involvement.
- Prioritizing U.S. assistance to Central America violence prevention, institutional strengthening of the criminal justice system, and support for efforts to combat corruption and strengthen internal and external controls over police forces. The U.S. should also develop a strategy to address the economic and factors driving high rates of migration from Central America and how U.S. assistance can help mitigate these factors.
- Reducing obstacles faced by Central American migrants with strong claims to asylum or refugee status, both in Mexico and in the United States.
- Launching a bottom-up reform of Mexico's National Migration Institute.
- Developing alternatives to mass detention of apprehended migrants, especially children.

The crisis of Central American migration at the U.S.-Mexico border must not become a pretext to intensify a buildup along a border that has seen a doubling of personnel and spending in the past eight years. And it most certainly should not encourage similar "hard" security measures in the fragile Mexico-Guatemala border zone.



*Migrants walk from the Guatemala border to the first train stop inside Mexico.*

*Mexico's Other Border* gives a firsthand look at the complexities our broken security policies face at a crucial juncture along this route. Here in Washington, we hope our politicians and policymakers might grasp these complexities before inadvertently worsening the crisis. Mexico too must consider the implications of increased border security along its southern border and address the often invisible but very real humanitarian crisis for migrants making the journey through Mexico.



*Sites WOLA researchers visited to produce Mexico's Other Border.*